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AUTHOR	Herman, William E.
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ABSTRACT

This study asked college students to report their current institutional grade point average (GPA) and grant permission for the researcher to examine the official records with the understanding that some had questioned the accuracy of such self-reported GPA. The relationship between self-report and actual GPA was moderately powerful, but considerable unexplained variance also existed (69%). Unexplained variance in actual GPA prediction was approximately cut in half when transfer status and number of credit hours taken were considered and cases with a current institutional GPA of zero were removed. Researchers who wish to use current GPA as a variable are highly encourages to obtain accurate GPA from the official records and to explore how transfer status might influence such data collection. (Author/SLD)

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College Student Awareness of Current G.P.A.

ED 479 753

William E. Herman

Professor

Department of Psychology

State University of New York

College at Potsdam

Potsdam, New York 13676-2294

Office Phone: (315) 267-2610

FAX: 315-267-2677

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Abstract

The current study asked college students to report their current institutional Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) and grant permission for the researcher to examine the official records with the understanding that some had questioned the accuracy of such self-reported G.P.A. The relationship between self-report and actual G.P.A. was moderately powerful (r=.56 **), but considerable unexplained variance also existed (69%). Unexplained variance in actual G.P.A. prediction was approximately cut in half when transfer status and number of credit hours taken were considered and cases with a current institutional G.P.A. of zero (0.00) were removed. Researchers who wish to employ current G.P.A. as a variable are highly encouraged to obtain accurate G.P.A. from the official records and explore how transfer status might influence such data collection.

College Student Awareness of Current G.P.A.

Researchers have often employed grade point average (G.P.A.) as a dependent variable when measuring or predicting collegiate academic success or achievement. Such a variable is a relevant and readily accessible target variable for those wishing to investigate the assumed causes of student accomplishments in the college or university classroom.

The retrieval of college G.P.A. information from long-term memory is a bit like trying to hit a moving target, since this value is likely to change somewhat 2-3 times per academic year. Bahrick, Hall, and Berger (1996) offered evidence that the accurate recalling of high school grades by college students declined according to grades received (89% for "A" grades to 29% for "D" grades). Others have reported the same phenomenon with college students predicting their own college G.P.A.—where grade inflation with low G.P.A. students is higher than students with higher G.P.A. records (Dobbins, Farh, & Werbel, 1993; Frucot & Cook, 1994).

Cassady (2001) reported a particularly robust Pearson product moment correlation ($r=.97$, $p<.0001$, $n=75$) between self-reported and actual cumulative G.P.A. for sophomore students and found that the accuracy of self-ratings increased as G.P.A. level increased. Dobbins et al. (1993) proposed that lower G.P.A. students might offer inflated results based upon social desirability.

Unfortunately, the practice of researchers varies greatly regarding how college cumulative G.P.A. is measured. This may seem like a trivial matter, but anyone who has carefully examined the research literature with respect to the measurement of college G.P.A. will detect that sometimes this information is derived from student

self-reports and at other times official records are used. Sometimes prominent researchers have knowingly or unknowingly promoted the use of self-reported G.P.A. in future research. For example, Benjamin, McKeachie, Lin, and Holinger (1981) reported that: "In previous studies we have found that students know and report accurately their grade point average" (p. 818).

There is a need to test the generalizability of such findings with divergent samples at different types of institutions. Although many researchers might consider this minutia, those who conduct educational research will find considerable confusion in the literature. This study asked students to accurately report their current institutional cumulative G.P.A. and provide permission for the researcher to check the official institutional records in order to check the accuracy of such self-reports.

Method:

Participants were student volunteers in (4) sections of psychology of adolescence and educational psychology courses on the campus of the State University of New York College at Potsdam. The sample (n=136) closely matched the institutional profile in terms of gender (73% female). Most participants were sophomores. SUNY Potsdam is a small liberal arts campus setting of approximately 4,000 primarily undergraduate students in a rural, small-town setting. A substantial number of transfer students (22%) were included in the sample. Mean S.A.T. scores for the entering 1996 freshman class were 480 verbal and 520 mathematics during the study (A.C.E., 1997).

Procedure:

Subjects were invited to place an "X" on a G.P.A. number line approximately 6.5 inches long with equal incremental markings of 0.0, 1.0, 1.5, 2.0, 2.5, 3.0, 3.5, and 4.0.

Prior to involvement in the study subjects gave explicit permission for the researcher to check the official G.P.A. records in the Registrar's Office.

Results:

Descriptive statistics for the variables were calculated. Average estimated G.P.A. (2.83) was found to be slightly higher than average actual G.P.A (2.43) This trend was found for males and females. The average participant in the study had completed 45 semester hours.

Self-reported G.P.A. was positively related to actual G.P.A. ($r=.56$, $p<.01$, $n=136$, 31% explained variance). Although this relationship was found to be statistically significant, nearly 69% of unexplained variance was also found. A careful examination of the results yielded the finding that several transfer students (17%of the entire sample) had reported previous institutional G.P.A. information when their actual current SUNY Potsdam G.P.A. was 0.0. This became obvious when a scatterplot based upon the data set revealed two linear relationships when only one was anticipated (see Table 1). When the transfer portion of the sample was removed from the data set, the correlation between self-reported and actual G.P.A. became considerably more robust ($r=.81$, $p<.01$, $n=113$, 66% of variance explained and 34% unexplained).

The correlational analyses were also conducted separately by gender. The correlation between actual and estimated G.P.A. was found to be higher for males ($r=.64$ **) than for females ($r=.52$ **).

Discussion:

It was found that the transfer status of subjects seriously compromised their ability to provide accurate G.P.A. estimates. Previous studies have not explicitly

considered how the transfer status of students might impact G.P.A. reporting. Even when such a sub-set of the sample was removed from consideration, 34% of unexplained variance still existed in the relationship between estimated and actual G.P.A. These findings cast doubt regarding the assumption that students can always accurately report their current G.P.A. in research studies. It may be the case that previous findings of such accuracy are not generalizable to all campus settings and subsets of the student population. A special caveat exists when transfer students are included in the sample. It does not seem worth the risk to rely upon estimates when only permission needs to be obtained from subjects to access the most accurate G.P.A. information available in the Registrar's Office. The results reported here were so striking that it is believed that other researchers employing G.P.A. as a variable might benefit from knowing of the potential pitfalls of measuring this often used variable.

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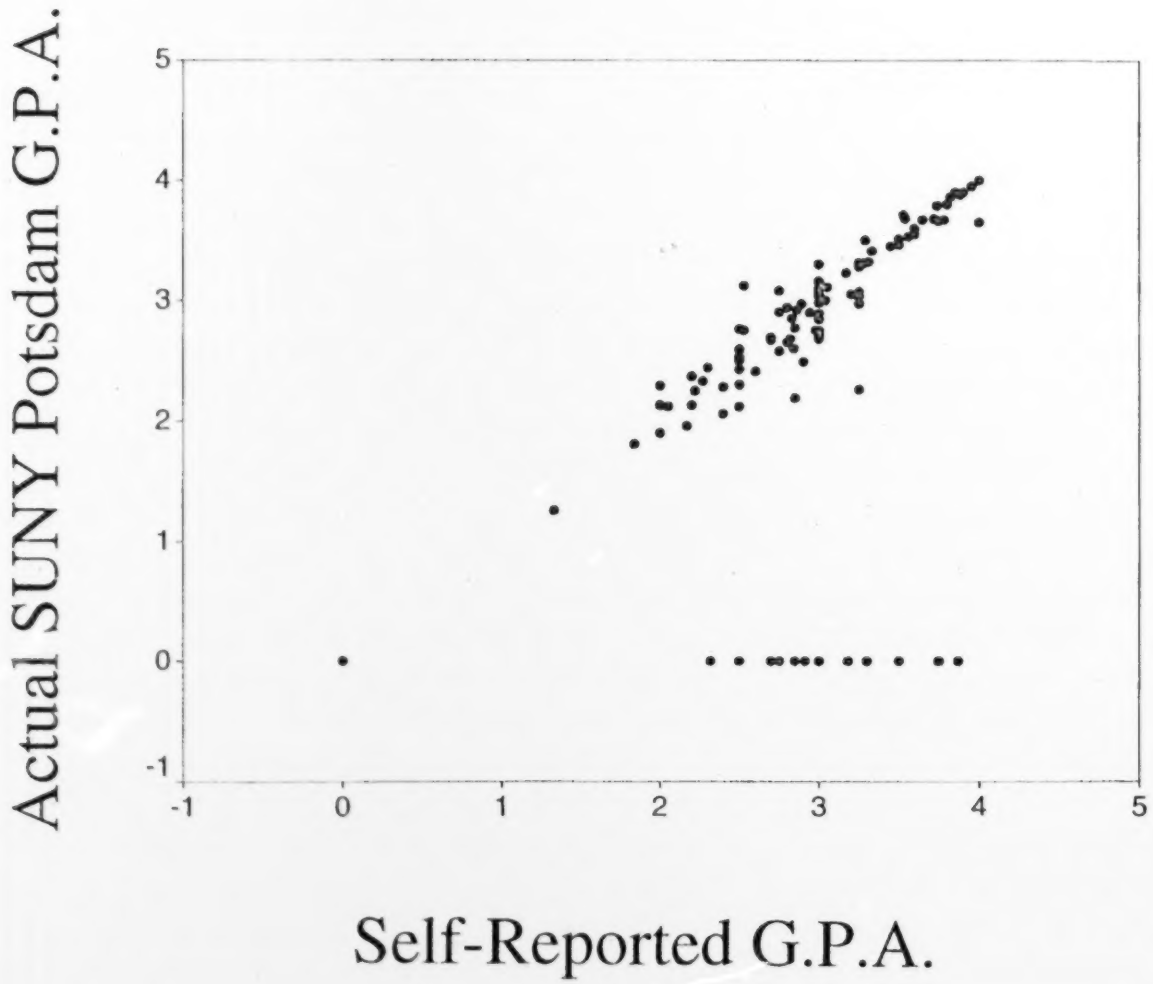
Table 1
Scatterplot of Self-Reported and Actual G.P.A.



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Signature: William E. Herman	Printed Name/Position/Title: WILLIAM E. HERMAN PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY	
Organization/Address: SUNY POTSDAM POTSDAM, NY 13676-2294	Telephone: (315) 267-2610	Fax: 315-267-2677
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